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June 6, 1944

THE FARMERS AND WHAT IS RIGHT

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(A talk delivered at the Northeast Region A.A.A. Conference at Durham, H. H., June 6, 1944, by Dr. George Dykhuizen, Department of Philosophy, The University of Vermont, Burlington, Vt. and Special Consultant, Northeast Region, A.A.A.)

Introduction

The Timeliness of the Topic

In cultures that are relatively stable and unchanging, people generally do not raise the question as to what is right. In such circumstances, men's ideas about the Right tend to become settled and are incorporated in laws, customs, and conventions. All that the intelligent individual needs to do to discover what is right is to look about him and observe what is being done by the people at large.

When everything is in rapid flux, when men's ideas are changing because of new insights; when political, economic, and social institutions are taking on novel forms; when new patterns of behavior are replacing old customs, then the question as to what is right inevitably arises.

Today, farmers and their leaders are, or ought to be, particularly interested in this question. For the farm programs of recent years, and especially the A.A.A., have introduced some rather profound changes in agricultural methods and social procedures. Instead of the old competitive agriculture, there has been introduced a high degree of cooperation among farmers; instead of a planless agricultural economy, there has come into being a planned economy; instead of prices controlled or regulated by an open and competitive market, there are support prices; instead of an agriculture indifferent to soil conservation, there has come an agriculture deeply concerned with it; instead of a government pursuing a hands-off policy toward agriculture, there is a government playing an important part in it by cooperating with farmers in establishing prices and income and in conserving the soil resources of our country.

Are these changes, and similar ones taking place in industry and labor, in keeping with our traditional conceptions of good and bad, right and wrong? As the serious-minded and conscientious farmer ponders these questions in his heart and mind, he wonders, and at times he is uncertain as to where his duty lies.

Many speakers and writers in discussing the farm situation tend to overlook this fact of moral uncertainty. They seem to think that the ills in agriculture and in society at large have their source in a politically ambitious government and in the desire of various economic groups, whether capital, labor, or agriculture, to grab as much as they can, - putting selfish interest above the common welfare.

We would be very naive, indeed, if we did not recognize these factors operating among us today. Surely, many of the policies of government are inspired by considerations of political expediency, and surely there are groups who are constantly at work devising ways of benefiting themselves at the expense of others. And these facts pose a problem of a particular sort, namely,



How shape or control the desires and impulses of such persons, whether in government, business, labor or agriculture, so as to make their interests fit in with larger social ends?

Much of what we find in personal, social, and governmental policies today, however, cannot be accounted for on the grounds of political expediency or selfish economic interest. The half-heartedness, the hesitancy, the inconsistencies which characterize so much of our governmental, social, and personal conduct arise not so much from moral badness as from moral uncertainty and lack of assurance that what we do is right. And this fact poses a problem quite different from the one I mentioned before, namely, How remove this moral uncertainty from people's minds? What answer shall we give to the farmers and to others when they ask: What is Right?

### The Aim of the Present Discussion

However timely this question is, it is not a new one. It is one which has been raised ever since men began seriously to think about their relations to each other. From ancient times, and down to the very present, men have wrestled with this problem.

The aim of my discussion this afternoon is not to remove your uncertainties by supplying you with specific answers to all your questions. Such an aim would be most presumptuous. Rather its aim is to discuss some of the basic ideas which inevitably arise when we try to think systematically about the Right. For I think that with the aid of such ideas, you may be able yourselves satisfactorily to clarify your own thoughts on these and other matters.

### The Source of Our Knowledge of What Is Right

One of the important points that needs to be considered concerns the source of our knowledge of what is right. Where are we to turn for our information when we want to know whether a particular practice is right or wrong? For example, is it right for government to support prices for agricultural commodities or to pay farmers subsidies to increase their income?

Much of our information at the present time comes through such public channels as newspapers, magazines, the radio and movies. Now, are these sources of information reliable? Are the judgments we read, or hear expressed, unbiased and informed? The multiplicity and variety of judgments which are made lead us to suspect their accuracy. Where, then, shall we turn?

### Government as the Source

An answer which has appeared again and again in the history of human thought and which is today popular in some parts of the world is that government is, and must be, the agency which determines the Right. How else, asks this theory, can societies maintain law and order? This doctrine, usually held by those who believe in an absolutistic, fascist form of government, maintains that those in charge of government know the Right and that it is the duty of citizens to submit without question to the dictates



of government. In the Fascist list of ten commandments, as drawn up in 1938, the last item is this: Mussolini is always right. And this statement is but a particularized version of the general thesis of this doctrine that the king, fuhrer, duce, leader, can do no wrong. Thus, if government decrees that strikes and lock-outs are wrong; that farmers ought to be paid subsidies; that capital must not organize itself to form monopolies - these judgments are final.

Recent history has so abundantly shown the falsity of this theory that we need not attempt to refute it further. But there is an element of truth in it which I would like to point out. It is true that citizens cannot play fast and loose with the laws of government. Citizens must, in general, honor and obey laws that duly established governments pass. Otherwise anarchy would prevail and societies would degenerate into chaos.

But such obedience is not necessarily evidence that the people accept the judgments of government as infallible. Rather it is evidence that they recognize that as a matter of social expediency laws must be obeyed. So, many of you may not approve of certain aspects of the farm program, but because it has become established in law, as good citizens you make your acts conform to it.

Democratic theories of government recognize that government is not an infallible source of our knowledge of right and wrong and that laws passed by a government are not ipso facto right. Hence they give to the people the right to criticize the actions of government, and, in appropriate ways, to work for the abolishment of laws which they judge to be wrong.

### Religion as the Source

Another famous theory is that matters of right and wrong are the special province of religion and that all the rules necessary for the guidance of life are to be found in the sacred writings of the great world religions. For our civilization this means the Bible.

Now it is true that our greatest moral as well as our greatest religious insights are to be found in the teachings of the Old and New Testaments. Such ideas as love, charity, justice, mercy, brotherhood are ideas which furnish the very stuff of our moral thinking. But there is this difficulty. All men of good will agree that justice is right. But when the attempt to give specific content to that term and to apply it in concrete cases, fundamental differences of opinion arise. Thus, consumers want farmers to get a just price for their products, and farmers want consumers to pay what is a just price. But what specifically is a just price, say, for milk, potatoes, wheat, etc.? Business may think that tariffs are just and that subsidies to farmers and guaranteed minimum wages to workers are unjust. Farmers and laborers, on the other hand, may have quite other ideas.

As a consequence of these differences of opinion in moral matters, some religious theories have asserted that an authoritative religious body must be set up to determine what is right and what is wrong in particular cases. We, in this country, have repudiated that idea and have asserted that in this nation there shall be no established, national religion or church one of whose functions shall be to pass an authoritative judgment on the acts of government



and of citizens. Rather, we have adopted the idea that all religious groups are to have the right to express their opinions but that citizens are free to accept or reject these opinions as they deem proper.

### Science as the Source

Still other people believe that science can tell us what is right. For, after all, it is the scientist, they say, who is in possession of the facts of a particular case. Therefore, who better than he can pass judgment on whether a particular procedure is right or wrong? Because of the esteem in which science and scientists are held, many people turn to scientists for statements about right and wrong. So, for example, farmers may feel inclined to turn to the agricultural economist for an answer to the question as to whether the plowing up of cotton is right or wrong.

Now it is, of course, true that the scientist goes in search of facts in a particular situation, and, without bias or prejudice, he records those facts. But the facts in which the scientist is interested are a special find of facts, selected by him according to the purpose he has in mind. Thus, the agricultural economist, as economist, is interested in the quantities of milk, wheat and pork produced and distributed and in the amounts of money that will be received by the various groups. The agronomist, as agronomist, is interested in the amounts of different minerals in the soil and in how these amounts act and react on each other. In neither case, however, does the scientist, as scientist, judge whether the manipulations of such quantities and amounts by men are morally right or morally wrong. His training or experience as scientist does not make him better qualified than others to pass moral judgments on such matters. He may step outside his role as scientist, and as an individual express his own personal opinion. But the value of that opinion rests not on his status as a scientist but on other and more personal grounds.

### The Individual as Source

I shall mention one more doctrine and that is the one which maintains that the individual is the source of moral knowledge and is capable in and by himself of determining what is right. There are two versions of this doctrine -- a false one and a true one, as I believe.

The false version rests on the alleged fact that each normal individual possesses a moral sense, or moral intuition, or conscience which enables him to distinguish right from wrong as unerringly as his eyes enable him to distinguish black from white. Thus, you, yourself, or some friend, neighbor or acquaintance may say that he knows it is wrong (or right) to accept government checks, because something within him, his conscience, tells him so.

I believe that this theory is false, because of certain obvious facts which tend to refute it. For example, if all normal men have this moral faculty, why do they not all make the same judgment concerning a moral issue as they do concerning a colored object? Secondly, why is it that conscientious people frequently find that their conscience has misled them and that they must revise their original judgment? Finally, why is it that in certain novel situations, man's conscience is at a loss as to just what is right -- it is as though man has eyes but sees not.



There is a form of the individualist theory, however, which I believe is true. This doctrine says that the individual does not possess a special moral sense which unerringly tells him what is right any more than he possesses a special economic sense which unerringly distinguishes for him a good bargain from a bad one. Rather, each normal individual possesses an intelligence and a set of feelings and emotions which, if properly trained and developed, will enable him to pass sound moral judgments. An individual with an intelligence trained to foresee the probable consequences of an act and a sympathy trained to take into account the well-being of others can pass moral judgments which go a long way in helping us to determine the moral quality of an act. From a meeting of similar minds all intent upon discovering what is the right, there will emerge a common judgment which can very well stand as the standard judgment.

Isn't this precisely the procedure we find in ordinary experience among men of intelligence and good will? The meetings on the A.A.A. which you attend are characterized, surely, by the desire on your part to determine the consequences of a proposed act on your lives and on the lives of others who will be affected. So you call in the economist, the nutritionist, the sociologist, the philosopher, and the theologian to present you with all the facts they can. And, then, you adopt that policy which will bring about the greatest amount of happiness to the greatest number of people.

Notice that this theory which I am defending does not say that any individual, however stupid and calloused, is capable of making an acceptable judgment. To maintain such a position would be as foolish as to affirm that any individual, however ignorant and insensitive, is capable of diagnosing a case of illness. Rather, the view which I am defending holds that just as in the various sciences only those individuals are capable of making sound judgments who by training and experience are keenly alive to the facts and possibilities in their fields, so in a situation involving right and wrong only those individuals who are sufficiently acquainted with the facts and values involved and who possess broad sympathies are capable of rendering moral judgments which merit serious attention.

And such individuals may conceivably be found anywhere -- among government personnel, among religious leaders, among scientists, etc. My previous remarks on government, religion, and science as sources of moral insight simply attempted to point out that government officials, religious leaders, and scientists were not necessarily qualified to make pronouncements on moral issues by virtue of their connections or membership in a group. But if, as men, they give evidence of proper acquaintance with the facts involved and of sensitiveness to the moral values involved, then they, like others of like mind and character, can pass judgments of merit.

I stress this fact of the individual as the source of moral knowledge and of judgment because it lies at the heart of our democratic way of life. Democracy allows the individual to pass judgments and to persuade others to his way of thinking. But unless there be adequate intelligence and good will to others, these judgments may be erroneous and these persuasions disastrous.

Our duty as citizens is clearly marked. Before we pass judgments we should: (1) strive to get at all the facts; and (2) strive to extend our sympathies to other people. Negatively, this means that we should reject the



teachings of those propagandists who would falsify or conceal facts and who would undermine our sympathy for others by playing on our selfish desires, fears, and prejudices.

### Human Happiness as the Standard for Determining the Right

Granting, then, that the individual, as we have defined him, is capable of making moral judgments, the question arises: What is the standard, or measuring rod, which will enable him to distinguish right from wrong?

Most people today, I believe, would agree that those arts are right which make for human happiness and that those are wrong which take away from it. However, not all people will agree on some of the details of this doctrine.

### The Substance of Human Happiness

For one thing, people will not agree on the question as to just what constitutes human happiness. Let me cite just a few of the more outstanding conceptions which people have.

One view is that human happiness is made up of pleasure. The happy life is one that is filled to the brim and overflowing with pleasure. Hence, moral wisdom consists of getting all the pleasures one can out of life while avoiding all those activities and responsibilities which might involve pain, risks, and disappointments.

Another view is that which despairs of finding genuine happiness in this sinful and uncertain world and asserts that the only happiness worth thinking about and striving for is that which comes to the faithful in a world to come. According to this view, people should not let their minds and hearts become absorbed in the affairs of this life, but should focus their attention on the possibilities of a life to come. The things of this life are temporal; those of the life to come are eternal. Hence, we do well to pay as little attention to the mundane affairs of this world as possible, and to devote the greater part of our energies to winning salvation in a world to come. This view is especially popular in times of tragedy, discouragement, and disillusionment such as prevailed during the decline of the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, and at the present time in certain parts of the world.

Still another view of the happy life is that which asserts that it is the successful life as contrasted with failure in life. The happy man, according to this view, is the man who makes a go of things -- the successful merchant, manufacturer, farmer, worker, lawyer, banker, physician. The view of human happiness is very popular in our day, permeated as our culture is with the business spirit.

Now each of these views can be criticized as too one-sided. To those who would make pleasure the all-important thing, we would say that happiness consists in developing a variety of interests in worthwhile objects and in striving successfully to attain these objects. Painful experiences may be involved in this process, but, even so, they may form an essential part of our happiness. For example, parents normally have a deep-seated interest in the health, education, and general well-being of their children. But, in striving for these objects, parents may have to endure self-denial and painful



hardships. Yet, they endure these gladly because their happiness rests in the happiness of their children.

For those who would neglect the opportunities for happiness which this world affords and would concentrate their attention upon those of a world to come, the criticism is this. There is no inevitable or necessary conflict between the two worlds, so that happiness in this world precludes happiness in a world hereafter. Jesus was interested in the salvation of man's immortal soul; but he was also deeply concerned that men should be happy in this world. "I came," he said in effect, "that ye might have life and that more abundantly."

To those who would make success in business and profession the sole source of happiness, the criticism is this. In a social order such as ours, in which so many of the good things of life can be acquired only by money, it is important that people be economically successful. But success in one's economic calling is not to be identified with a completely successful life. The truly successful life is one which also makes a success of family, friendship, and other human relationships and which has a place for spiritual and cultural values.

#### The Distribution of Human Happiness

As to the question on what basis shall human happiness be distributed, there have been, fundamentally, two different views.

One theory would make status the controlling factor. Persons having superior status by virtue of birth, color, nationality, race, creed, or wealth, are entitled to one form of happiness. Persons having inferior status are to receive a quite different sort of happiness. Thus, in ancient Greek and Roman civilization, the citizen had one set of rights, the alien another, the slave another. In medieval civilization the feudal lord was entitled to one system of rights, the serf and the laborer to another.

The second type of theory holds that all human beings, by virtue of the fact that they are human, have equal rights to happiness -- a black man as much as a white man; a poor man as much as a rich man; a Jew as much as a Gentile; a Methodist as much as a Baptist. The central idea of this theory is that human individuality or personality, wherever found, is a sacred thing and distinctions resting on the accident of birth, race, color, etc. are invidious and not to be tolerated. This idea, as you all recognize, lies at the heart of our American democratic faith and finds expression in the words of the Declaration of Independence that all men have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Unfortunately, our faith is much better than our works frequently are.

This latter theory does not hold that all men are entitled to the same amounts and kinds of happiness. People differ in capacity to enjoy as well as in their interests. To subject them all to the same happiness is obviously absurd. What this theory does mean is that each individual must be free and on an equal footing with others to enjoy whatever kind of happiness he can regardless of his race, creed, or color.



### Summary

I told you at the beginning of my remarks that my purpose at this time was not to supply you with ready-made answers to your questions. Rather, my aim was to discuss with you certain basic ideas of the Right with the hope that they might be of aid to you in thinking through your own problems. The two ideas which I hope I made clear are: (1) that in a democracy the individual is the source of moral judgments of right and wrong; and (2) that human happiness is the standard by which we determine the rightness of an act.

The practical implications of my discussion, the ones which I hoped to impress on your minds, are these:

1. The individual must keep himself informed concerning the facts in the situation which he is called upon to judge.
2. The individual must broaden his sympathies so as to include the happiness of other people in his calculations.